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Perceived Helicopter Parenting and Self-Determination Theory in Emerging Adulthood

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An Honors College Project Presented to the Faculty  
of the Undergraduate College of Health and Behavioral Studies  
James Madison University

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by Emily Hivick

December 2019

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Psychology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

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Project Advisor: Monica Reis-Bergan, Ph.D.  
Professor, Psychology

---

Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D. Professor,  
Dean, Honors College

---

Reader: Kevin Apple, Ph.D.  
Professor, Psychology

---

Reader: Claire Lyons, Ph.D.  
Professor, Psychology

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at Honors College Symposium, on December 6, 2019.

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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincerest appreciation to my faculty advisor and readers as the completion of this project would not have been possible without their support and guidance. Specifically, I would like to thank my readers, Dr. Apple and Dr. Lyons, for their constructive feedback, encouragement, and insight on this project. I would also like to offer a very special thanks to my faculty advisor, Dr. Monica Reis-Bergan, for taking me on as an advisee when I was brand new to the psychology department. I greatly appreciate the endless support, kindness, direction, and passion you provided throughout this entire project. All of your time and guidance on this project helped me grow and learn so much not only as a research student but as an individual as well, and for that I sincerely thank you. Finally, I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Psychology Department and Honors College for giving me the fantastic opportunity to conduct and complete a capstone project.

### **Abstract**

Self-determination theory encompasses three different elements, competence, autonomy and social belongingness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Helicopter parenting is defined as extreme involvement in a child's life to the point of making decisions for them while also being associated with high levels of parental support and high feelings of parental-child closeness (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Research has shown that helicopter parenting has been associated with psychological and behavioral problems in young adults, (Odenweller, Booth-Butterfield, & Weber, 2014). The current study investigated the association between perceived helicopter parenting and self-determination theory components along with intrinsic motivation and academic and extracurricular engagement in college students. Helicopter parenting and self-determination variables were found to be inversely related, such that high perceived helicopter parenting correlated with low scores for self-determination variables. This study provides key insight into perceived helicopter parenting and the possible maladaptive associations for emerging adults and the responsibilities that come with adulthood.

### Perceived Helicopter Parenting and Self-Determination Theory in Emerging Adulthood

Is there a relationship between parenting style and the child's development of self-autonomy, sense of belongingness and/or competence? Are children of highly involved parents more likely to have low levels of intrinsic motivation for academic work and/or extracurricular activities? Parent involvement in their child's life is usually viewed as positive, but can parents be too invested? Most researchers would say, 'yes,' to all of these questions. Several studies have demonstrated an inverse relationship between parental involvement and a child's level of intrinsic motivation, competence, and sense of belongingness. This overparenting can be defined as parents who frequently intervene or give off the perception that they will intervene in their child's life in situations and contexts where there are potential negative experiences or consequences (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012). Overparenting in a child's life can become particularly detrimental during adolescence and college years, a period also known as emerging adulthood, as this is a crucial time period in an individual's life for various social and psychological developments (Nelson, 2005). Many university officials are concerned about the current and future implications for children of helicopter parents as they begin to enter college, and eventually the workplace, and are unable to resolve tasks on their own, keep up with work demands, or navigate a professional setting independently (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011).

Emerging adulthood focuses on the age range between 18-25, which is somewhat of an "in-between" period between adolescents and full adulthood; it is a relatively new concept as a few decades ago most people only perceived people as adults or kids (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is a time period that includes obtaining new responsibilities and less parental support. Successful transition into feeling like a true adult is crucial for the success of individuals in society (Nelson, 2005). One might speculate that the top factors associated with feeling like a

true adult include things like having a stable job, being in a long-term committed relationship and/or completing education, but according to research by Greene et al. (1992), this is not the case. Data indicate the criteria that young people account on the top of their list for being an ‘adult’ are being held solely responsible for one’s actions, autonomous decision making, and self-sufficiency, which in turn is related to being financially independent (Greene et al., 1992). During this transitional period to full-fledged adulthood, many individuals are able to fully explore their area of interests for education and career. Although it is common to work a minimal skill part-time job during adolescent years to support various leisure activities or help contribute to their wellbeing, most young adults are still not fully financially independent. This might be why it is not until a young adult is more able to fully support themselves through an adult work role that they begin to fully identify as a grown-up (Arnett, 2000). Much like educational choices and experiences, deciding on a lifelong career allows emerging adults to learn more about themselves and therefore facilitates self-development of identity. Though the idea of ‘discovering oneself’ is largely associated with adolescence, in reality emerging adulthood is when actual identity achievement is usually more attainable (Arnett, 2000). Self-autonomy is a crucial element of identity exploration and mental and social maturation, which is why a parenting style like helicopter parenting may cause issues for emerging adults.

Overinvolvement by parents, or as the current study is specifically examining, helicopter parenting, can have many poor developmental associations for children as exemplified by a study conducted by Lindell, Campione-Barr, and Killoren (2017). The researchers had 260 college students take an online questionnaire. Their results showed that autonomy restricting behavioral and psychological control were negatively associated with transition competency for adulthood (Lindell, Campione-Barr and Killoren, 2017). Participants who scored high for autonomy

restricting behavioral and psychological control scored lower on transition competency for adulthood. Bradley-Geist and Olson-Buchanan found related findings, as their research on associations between helicopter parenting and college students revealed that over-parenting was associated with maladaptive responses to workplace scenarios. In their study researchers provided participants with four different workplace scenarios and different choices of how they would respond to each of them, with certain choices deemed as ‘maladaptive’ (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2015). A positive relationship between perceived overparenting and maladaptive responses was found, meaning participants who scored high for perceived overparenting scored higher for maladaptive workplace responses.

This failure to negotiate ‘grown-up’ situations is becoming an increasingly alarming situation, as research by Nelson and Barry (2005) found that only 25% of participants in their study, ages 19-25 ( $M = 21.09$ ), identified as having reached adulthood. It is not only the emerging adults that are failing to see themselves as full-fledged adults but their parents too, as another study by Nelson et al. (2007), revealed that less than 20% of parents answered ‘yes’ to “Do you think your child has reached adulthood?” This phenomenon may shed some light on why so many parents today continue to shelter and coddle their children in ways that align with perceived helicopter parenting, well into their legal adult years. Though most perceived helicopter parents are doing what they think is best for their child, research has found high perceived helicopter parenting scores to be associated with poor child outcomes like low self-worth, high anxiety, depression, and impulsivity (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2011). These associations, along with many other findings which tie helicopter parenting to negative social and psychological outcomes (e.g., LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011; Lindell, Campione-Barr & Killoren, 2017; Odenweller, Booth-Butterfield & Weber, 2014), is why it is so important to



examine the implications that perceived helicopter parenting can have on emerging adulthood further. Many of these issues found to be associated with perceived helicopter parenting pertain to self-determination theory as competence, autonomy, and social belongingness are all crucial for psychological development (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

Self-determination is a theory that encompasses three different elements, competence, autonomy, and social belongingness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As the name indicates this is a theory centered on the idea of one's 'self' and the constant battle people have between the active, inner self and various external sources, particularly during developmental stages of life (Deci & Ryan, 1991). According to this theory, competence, autonomy, and social belongingness are innate needs that an individual must foster and establish in order to fully develop the self (Deci & Ryan, 1991). In relation to parenting style, self-determination theory stresses the importance of autonomy supportive parents so that children can develop intrinsic motivation and competence (Ryan et al, 2006). Competence pertains to the concept of understanding how to attain and have control over various internal and external results and being capable of completing those steps to reach such desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1991). As outlined in the same article by Deci and Ryan (1991) an individual must first have a sense of competence in order to cultivate and possess intrinsic motivation. The third element of self-determination theory, social belongingness, is the idea that parental support and peer acceptance is essential for enabling motivation within an individual (Deci & Ryan, 1990). The following study will examine the relationship between perceived helicopter parenting and the student's self-reported needs identified by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1990). The connection between perceived helicopter parenting and intrinsic motivation for academic work and extracurricular activities in college will be explored.

### **Background on Helicopter Parenting**

Helicopter parenting is centered on maintaining control over the child. This parenting style is also associated with high levels of parental support and high feelings of parental-child closeness (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Since helicopter parents take on a great amount of responsibility for their child's wellbeing and attempt to solve much of the issues their child may come across in his or her life it becomes extremely difficult for that child to learn how to solve problems on his or her own and can end up becoming very reliant on others for help (Sergin et al, 2012). An example of this comes from researchers Odenweller, Booth-Butterfield, and Weber, as they found that neurotic tendencies, dependency on others, and ineffective coping skills were positively related to perceived helicopter parenting in college students. Various researchers in the field of parenting (Gower and Dowling, 2008; Pope-Edwards and Liu, 2002) have proposed that helicopter parents fail to provide reasoning to the student for their parenting actions which stifles multiple key psychological and social developments in children. Lacking reason in parenting means that children rarely receives an explanation for why they should or should not do something and are instead just expected to do as they are told because the parent 'said so.'

One consequence of this type of overparenting pertains to motivation, as this type of parenting style propagates much of the motivation for children to stem from external praises and rewards, thus hindering the development of intrinsic motivation (Pope-Edwards & Liu, 2002). As previously mentioned, the three components of self-determination theory all come together to help enable the development of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which is why it is beneficial to individually investigate the associations between helicopter parenting and the three components of self-determination theory.

### **Helicopter Parenting and Competence**

The ability to develop and have competence is crucial for young adults, especially in relation to motivation in an academic setting and extracurricular activities. According to research done by Deci and Ryan (1991) allowing for the development of competence will enable individuals to possess higher levels of motivation and drive to complete various tasks, such as academic work and participating in social activities. A connection between helicopter parenting and competence can be found in a study conducted by Bradley-Geist and Olson-Buchanan (2014); they surveyed 482 undergraduate students and found a negative correlation between over-parenting and students' general and social self-efficacy. Findings from this study indicated that high scores on perceived over-parenting and were correlated with low scores on the general and social self-efficacy scales. Relatedly, a research study by van Ingen et al. (2015), which assessed 190 undergraduate students as participants, also found a significant association between high perceived helicopter parenting scores and general and social self-efficacy, such that participants who scored higher on perceived helicopter parenting scored lower on general and social self-efficacy. Similarly, Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012), examined responses from 438 participants from four different universities. They found high levels of perceived helicopter parenting to be associated with poor development of an adult identity and low self-confidence in students. Confidence and self-efficacy are directly entwined with competence as the concept pertains to the idea of having control over various outcomes and being able to successfully complete steps to reach those goals (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

### **Helicopter Parenting and Social belongingness**

Social belongingness is also a key need outlined in self-determination theory; having a place in society enables identity development and overall wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 1991). As mentioned, social belongingness is a concept that encompasses not only a relationship with peers

but also family, which is why the helicopter parenting style can impede children's fulfillment of social belongingness. In Deci and Ryan's (1991) work, they discuss how parents who exercise a heavy level of control over their children may result in the child giving up autonomy and personal development in order to satisfy the parent. The need to belong is extremely important to individuals which is why the inhibition of this self-determination element can be so detrimental to an individual's mental health. Though no empirical evidence has directly linked helicopter parenting to low feelings of social belongingness, helicopter parenting has been linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety in college students, which, in turn, were associated with lower levels of academic and social adjustment to college (Darlow, 2017). Self-efficacy and competence pertain to this area of social belongingness as well, as it is not only about completing tasks, but also social situations. The study by van Ingen et al. (2015) that was previously mentioned discusses how someone with high self-efficacy will be more likely to talk to new people and initiate relationships with peers. From this study not only was self-efficacy found to be negatively related to helicopter parenting but also a lack of trust among peers, poor peer communication and alienation from peers. This study, along with others mentioned, is significant as it reveals possible implications of helicopter parenting and how it can potentially affect so many areas of a child's life and development.

### **Helicopter Parenting and Autonomy**

Another component of self-determination theory that is largely interconnected with helicopter parenting is autonomy, or in this case, the lack thereof. As mentioned helicopter parenting is essentially rooted in autonomous restricting behavior. Autonomy is extremely important when it comes to optimizing a child's psychosocial development, particularly during adolescence through the emerging adulthood years (Van der Kaap-Deeder et al, 2015). In

relation to self-determination theory, the need for autonomy is encapsulated in the idea that one must have a sense of freewill and is able to actively make decisions based upon one's own accord (Deci & Ryan, 2000). At a young age this could be something as simple as deciding to do house chores with no incentive involved and as children grow older could be expressed in deciding one's major area of study. Just like the other components of self-determination theory the development of autonomy is contingent upon the all the needs; social belongingness and competence, being fulfilled, thus parents need to facilitate all aspects of these needs so their child can prosper in various psychological and social ways (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) stressed in their study that perceived helicopter parenting is not at its core nefarious, as they found many adolescents who perceive high levels of parental controls (i.e. autonomous restricting behavior) to be more inclined to feel emotionally close and supported by their parents. This is why it is so crucial for parents to promote not only a feeling of social belongingness but self-regulation and autonomy as well. In one study, which focused on the relationship between teachers and students, researchers found that teachers who supported students' autonomy had students who were, in turn, more intrinsically motivated to learn (Reeve & Jang, 2006). Though this was a study focused on the teacher-student relationship it is certainly not a stretch to say that this conclusion of autonomy leading to intrinsic motivation cannot be extended to a parent's ability to enable intrinsic motivation as well. As pointed out by Deci and Ryan (1991) autonomy is essentially an aspect of self-regulation, thus if an individual is able to and/or even encouraged to self-regulate their actions, internal autonomous types of motivation (i.e. intrinsic) will progress as well.

### **Helicopter Parenting and Intrinsic motivation**

Intrinsic motivation is one of the most important elements an individual can possess, as it is crucial for the regulation of social, biological, and mental processes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An individual can feel a desire to accomplish a task for a variety of reasons, whether that is because of the threat of a consequence or by their own internal drive to, otherwise known as intrinsically motivated. Deci and Ryan (1991) discussed how an individual must foster and develop intrinsic motivation via competence, social belongingness, and autonomy. It should also be noted that external motivation can at times be much more rewarding and easy to follow, shifting an individual's motivational forces entirely from being internal to external locus of causality (Deci & Ryan, 1991). This generally accepted theory of motivation aligns with another danger of helicopter parenting as a child who is consistently externally motivated by their parent(s) will, in turn, fail to develop intrinsic motivation and will instead rely exclusively on external motivating factors. According to self-determination theory being an intrinsically motivated individual leads to higher levels success for things like academic work, which is among just one of the reasons why it is an important element to develop (Deci & Ryan, 1990). An example of the relationship between helicopter parenting and academic work can be found in a study that was conducted by Luebbe et al. (2016), which included 377 participants. In this study researchers found perceived helicopter parenting to be associated with academic functioning (Luebee et al., 2016), such that participants who scored high on perceived helicopter parenting scored lower on academic functioning. Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) found helicopter parenting to be negatively associated with school engagement. This academic success relates to the other three elements of self-determination as well, autonomy, competence, and social belongingness, which is why it is so crucial for parents to facilitate an autonomy granting environment so that children can develop intrinsic motivation.

### **The Present Study**

The present study sought to link self-determination theory and helicopter parenting, in order to expand pathways for future research that is associated with perceived helicopter parenting. Additionally, this study replicated previous research examining perceived helicopter parenting. Consistent with research by Lindell, Campione-Barr, and Killoren (2017), I hypothesized that perceived helicopter parenting would be inversely associated with emerging adulthood identity subscales. In relation to this question, I hypothesized that people who scored high on the perceived helicopter parenting scale would score lower on the adult identity scale subscales. The present study also explored connections between perceived helicopter parenting and components of self-determination theory, which few empirical studies have looked into. Components of self-determination theory, i.e. competence, autonomy, and social belongingness, are hypothesized to be inversely associated with perceived helicopter parenting. Specifically, in regard to this hypothesis, I predicted that people who scored high on the perceived helicopter parenting scale would score lower on the need satisfaction scales for autonomy, social belongingness, and competence. An additional hypothesis aimed to examine the association between perceived helicopter parenting and intrinsic motivation for academics. In accordance with prior research (Goldman & Goodboy, 2016; Reeve & Jang, 2006), I predicted a negative association between perceived helicopter parenting and intrinsic motivation. Specifically, I anticipated that people who scored high on the perceived helicopter parenting scale would score lower on the intrinsic motivation scale. Consistent with past research by Luebbe et al. (2016), I predicted a negative correlation between perceived helicopter parenting and academic engagement, specifically I predicted that people who scored high on the perceived helicopter scale would have lower academic engagement. The final hypothesis is in regard to

extracurricular activities, I hypothesized that high perceived helicopter parenting would be associated with low extracurricular involvement.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

I collected online survey data from 202 college students, 30% were male, 83% of students were in their first two years of undergraduate studies and 97% were between 18 to 21 years old. The majority of the students were White (77.1%), with others being Hispanic or Latino (5.0%), mixed race (5.0%), African American/Black (4.5%), or Asian (4.5%). The majority of students reported both their parents received a college degree (first parent: 71.9%, second parent: 57%) and their parents estimated combined income was either under \$100,000 (54.7%) or over \$100,000 (45.3%). Finally, the majority of students (76.2%) do not have a job during the academic year. Students received participation credit for the James Madison University psychology participant pool.

### **Measures**

The participants took several online assessments. These scales are outlined below:

*Helicopter Parenting.* The scale that was used to measure helicopter parenting was developed by Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012). The helicopter parenting measure scale is a 5-item scale that uses a 5-point Likert scale to measure responses. The questions on the 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all like him/her) to 5 (a lot like him/her). Sample questions from this scale include, “My parent makes important decisions for me (e.g., where I live, where I work, what classes I take)”, “My parent intervenes in solving problems with my employers or professors”, “My parent intervenes in settling disputes with my roommates or friends”, “My parent intervenes in solving problems with my employers or professors”, “My parent solves any



crisis or problem I might have”, “My parent looks for jobs for me or tries to find other opportunities for me (e.g., internships, study abroad, etc)” (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). The reliability for the current study was acceptable ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

*Behavioral control.* A five-item scale which assessed parents’ tendency to control their child’s friends, money, or activities established by Kerr and Stattin (2000). Participants answered questions on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (not at all like him/her) to 5 (a lot like him/her). Sample questions included, “My parent tries to limit or control who my friends are”, “My parent tries to set rules about what I do with my free time”, “My parent tries to tell me what I can and can't do on nights and weekends” (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). The reliability for the current study was acceptable ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Psychological control.* A modified four items scale which assessed psychological controlling parenting (Barber, 1996). Students answered questions on a 3-point rating scale ranging from 1 (not at all like him/her) to 3 (a lot like him/her). Sample questions included, “My parent brings up past mistakes when s/he criticizes me”, “My parent is less friendly with me if I do not see things his/her way”, “My parent will avoid looking at me when I have disappointed him/her” (Barber, 1996). The reliability for the current study was acceptable ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Emerging Adulthood Identity.* A modified version of the criteria for transition to adulthood scale developed by Arnett (1997). This is a 21-item scale, which includes three transition subscales for behavioral, role transition, emotional and a 1-item question to assess cognition. A sample question from the behavior subscale included, “Avoid illegal drugs,” a sample question from the role transition subscale included, “Financially independent from parents,” a sample question from the emotion subscale included “Establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult,” and cogitation, “Decide on personal beliefs and values independently

of parents or other influences,” (Arnett, 1997). Participants responded with either “yes”, “no,” or “in some respects yes, and in respects ways no”. For each category the number of adult behaviors students indicated were summed.

*Psychological Need Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction.* Self-determination need satisfaction scale, modified to be specific to James Madison University for the present study (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). This measure included need satisfaction and need frustration scales, the need frustration items were recoded so that they could be combined with need satisfaction, such that a high score is a positive indicator of needs satisfaction. Participants responded using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Need satisfaction and frustration were assessed across three subscales, one for autonomy ( $\alpha = .82$ ), one for competence ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and one for social belongingness ( $\alpha = .86$ ), these subscales were 3-items each. A sample question from the autonomy need satisfaction scale included, “I get to do interesting things at JMU”, competence need satisfaction, “I like and accept the hard challenges at JMU”, a sample question from the social belongingness need satisfaction, “I feel a close sense of connection with people at JMU” (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). Sample questions from need frustration for autonomy included, “At JMU I feel a lot of aversive pressure”, for competence, “I struggle with tasks that I should be good at JMU,” a sample question from the need frustration for social belongingness, “At JMU, I feel lonely” (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012).

*The Intrinsic Motivation to Learn Scale.* A 10-item scale developed by Goldman and Goodboy (2016), used to measure intrinsic motivation levels in relation to academic work. Students will respond on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Sample questions obtained from this scale include, “Learning new concepts in this class is fulfilling to me”, “Developing my understanding of the content is rewarding to me”, “Learning

new things in this class makes me feel better about myself” (Goldman & Goodboy, 2016). The reliability for the current study was acceptable ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

*The Academic Engagement Scale* is a 14-item scale used to assess academic engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). For this measure there were three separate subscales for each component, behavioral engagement, which utilized a 4-item scale with adequate reliability ( $\alpha = .68$ ), emotional engagement, which utilized a 5-item scale and had acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and a 5-item cognitive engagement scale which had adequate reliability ( $\alpha = .67$ ). All of the items were assessed with a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A sample question from the behavior engagement scale included, “I pay attention in class,” sample question from the cognitive scale included, “I study at home even when I don’t have a test,” a sample question from the emotional subscale included, “I feel excited by the work in school” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

A modified version of the extracurricular survey developed by Kaufman and Gabler (2004) was used to assess extracurricular involvement in college. This is a 13-item survey modified for James Madison University for the present study. Students responded to whether they were involved in the activities/organizations with either “yes” or “no”. Sample questions from this survey included, “Student Government Association”, “Club sports”, “School yearbook, newspaper, or literary magazine” (Kaufman and Gabler, 2004).

## **Results**

Hypothesized associations were analyzed using Pearson product moment correlations with a 2-tailed, .05 significance level. Data for the current study was randomly sampled, with normal distributions and linear relationships observed for all variables. Associations between measures of helicopter parenting were considered first, then compared with scores of transition

to adulthood along with the self-determination variables, autonomy, competence and social belongingness and intrinsic motivation. Finally, all helicopter variables were compared with college life variables (i.e. academic engagement, extracurricular involvement, academic performance). The means and standard deviations for the students' scores for each measure can be found in Table 1.

Scores from the 5-item Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) perceived helicopter parenting scale positively correlated with those from the behavior control (Kerr & Stattin, 2000) ( $r = .41, p < .001$ ) and psychological control (Barber, 1996) ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ), such that high scores on helicopter parenting indicated high scores of parental behavioral control and psychological control. Based on previous research by Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012), these correlations were expected as aspects of helicopter parenting directly correspond with psychological and behavioral control.

#### *Emerging Adulthood Identity*

I predicted that people who scored high on the perceived helicopter parenting scale would score lower on the adult identity subscales. This hypothesis was not fully supported as the correlation between helicopter parenting and the four subscales of transition to adulthood (Arnett, 1997) yielded mixed results. No significant correlations were found between helicopter parenting and transition to adulthood behavior ( $r = -.10, p = .17$ ), transition to adulthood role ( $r = .02, p = .83$ ), or transition to adulthood emotional ( $r = -.13, p = .07$ ). Analysis of the association between helicopter parenting and the dichotomous 1-item variable of cognition involved conducting a point-biserial correlation ( $r = -.24, p = .001$ ). Students who responded "no" to this item reported higher scores for perceived helicopter parenting.

#### *Self-Determination Theory & Intrinsic Motivation*

I predicted that participants who scored high on the perceived helicopter parenting scale would score lower on need satisfaction for autonomy, social belongingness, and competence. Generally consistent with these predictions, significant negative correlations were found between helicopter parenting and need satisfaction for two out of the three variables of self-determination theory (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012): need satisfaction for autonomy ( $r = -.22, p = .002$ ), and need satisfaction for competence ( $r = -.27, p < .001$ ). Meaning, high scores on helicopter parenting correlated with low scores for need satisfaction for self-determination variables of autonomy, and competence. Perceived helicopter parenting and need satisfaction for belongingness yielded a weaker correlation ( $r = -.14, p = .055$ ). In accordance with prior research, I hypothesized that helicopter parenting would be negatively correlated with intrinsic motivation for academics. This hypothesis was supported as perceived helicopter parenting was found to be inversely related to intrinsic motivation for academics (Goldman & Goodboy, 2016) ( $r = -.22, p = .001$ ), such that high scores for helicopter parenting indicated low scores for intrinsic motivation.

#### *College Life Variables*

The next set of analyses focused on examining the association between perceived helicopter parenting and college life variables. Consistent with prior research, I predicted that students who perceived more helicopter parenting would report lower academic engagement. This prediction was only partially supported as scores from the academic engagement scale (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), which included three subscales for emotional, cognitive and behavioral academic engagement, yielded mixed results for correlations with helicopter parenting. No significant correlation was found between helicopter parenting and cognitive academic engagement ( $r = .01, p = .97$ ); however, a significant negative correlation between helicopter parenting and behavioral academic engagement ( $r = -.32, p < .001$ ) suggests that

students providing higher scores for helicopter parenting report lower scores for behavioral academic engagement. A negative correlation between emotional academic engagement and helicopter parenting ( $r = -.27, p < .001$ ), indicates that students reporting higher scores for helicopter parenting indicated emotional academic engagement. No significant correlation was found between helicopter parenting and the modified extracurricular involvement survey (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004) ( $r = .03, p = .67$ ).

#### *Additional Analyses*

Some additional associations of interest pertain to emerging adulthood and behavioral and psychological control. Though no significant correlations were found between helicopter parenting and transition to adulthood for the subscales of behavior, role transition and emotion, there were significant associations with parental behavioral and psychological control. Significant negative correlations between parental behavioral control and transition to adulthood behavior ( $r = -.17, p = .016$ ) and emotion ( $r = -.15, p = .04$ ) were found, such that high scores for behavioral control were associated with low adulthood behavior and emotion. A significant negative correlation was also found between parental psychological control and the subscale of transition to adulthood emotional ( $r = -.23, p = .001$ ), such that high scores for psychological control were associated with low adulthood emotion.

Another association that was expected and found was a positive correlation between competence and intrinsic motivation ( $r = .22, p = .001$ ), such that high scores for intrinsic motivation corresponded with high scores for competence.

### **Discussion**

The current study aimed to expand previous knowledge on aspects of helicopter parenting and emerging adulthood while adding novel research pertaining to helicopter

parenting's connection to self-determination theory. Results from this study reveal that there is a link between perceived helicopter parenting and aspects of self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation, and certain components of academic engagement. Results also revealed an association between perceived helicopter parenting and emerging adulthood for the 1-item scale of cognition. Self-determination theory is a broad concept that has been examined in a multitude of ways but significantly less research has been conducted looking at the relations between self-determination theory and helicopter parenting. Previous research supports the idea that an autonomy supporting environment is crucial in fostering the development of self-determination variables, this idea may indicate why students who perceive having helicopter parents had lower levels of need satisfaction for autonomy and competence (Ryan et al., 2006).

In relation to the helicopter parenting scale used for this study, it is important to note that it is based on perception rather than reality, meaning a student may perceive their parent as helicoptering and think their parent will intervene in their lives, but it does not necessarily mean their parent has. Another important aspect of the helicopter parenting scale is that it is very college-specific, with items on the scale even referring to roommate situations and professors, thus it is a particularly good measure for the current study which specifically examined college students. This is in contrast to the psychological and behavioral control scales which are more tailored toward younger children and may not be an accurate assessment of helicopter parenting in college-aged individuals.

As aforementioned the emerging adulthood identity hypothesis was only partially supported as the cognitive item was found to be associated with helicopter parenting but behavior, role transition and emotion subscales were not. This negative correlation is still of interest as it means that students who perceive helicopter parenting were less likely to identify as

adults on a cognitive level. This item of cognition for transition to adulthood specifically assesses elements like holding personal beliefs, thoughts, and values that are independent of those of one's parent(s). Students of helicopter parents lack autonomy, along with other factors, which might impact a child's ability to distance themselves from their parents and thus decide on their own personal beliefs and values. As mentioned, the transition to adulthood subscales of emotion and behavior were significantly correlated to perceived psychological and behavioral controlling parenting which are closely related to helicopter parenting. Meaning, students that who perceived more controlling parents on a psychological and behavioral level were less likely to identify with adult behavior and emotion. A limitation for this measure is that the emerging adulthood identity scales more generally assess aspects of adult behavior rather than assessing if the students perceive themselves as adults or 'identify' as adults. Though these scales were not directly assessing if students identify as adults, scores from the subscales were mixed, suggesting students are in a time period of transition (Table 1).

Results from the survey data indicate that perceived helicopter parenting has an impact on all of the needs identified by self-determination theory expect for social belongingness. These results indicate that students who perceive helicopter parenting have lower levels of need satisfaction for autonomy and competence. One of the leading theorists of self-determination theory has stressed the importance of autonomy-supportive parents in order to foster the development of competence (Ryan et al., 2006). Overinvolvement in a child's life and autonomy restriction are hallmark behaviors of helicopter parenting which may also play a role in the impediment of competence and autonomy development. For example, if a student's parent frequently communicates with their professors regarding the student's grades or position in the class this might convey to the student that parent does not trust their ability to handle the



situation on their own. If a student feels that they must always rely on help from others, this may stifle the student's competence and autonomy. Regarding social belongingness, though the correlation was not significant there is still a small negative relationship between perceived helicopter parenting and social belongingness ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p = .055$ ). A possible reason that students who perceived helicopter parents had slightly lower need satisfaction for social belongingness could be that their parent controls much of their social life, including whom they spend time with and when.

As previously mentioned, perceived helicopter parenting was also found to be negatively associated with intrinsic motivation for academics. Consistent with work by Deci and Ryan (1991) which discusses how intrinsic motivation requires the components of self-determination theory in order to be attained, the current research demonstrated that perceived helicopter parenting is negatively associated with both self-determination factors of autonomy and competence and intrinsic motivation for academics. In general, students should want to study because it is enriching to them and fulfills a desire to learn, not solely because they want to meet their parents' expectations or are just doing what they are told. Students who experience helicopter parenting generally lack autonomy and are often encouraged to do things because it is what the parent wants thus hindering intrinsic desire and motivation. In relation to this, if a student feels like they must always rely on their parent in order to succeed and judge what is 'good' behavior, that student may lack any type of internal drive to accomplish goals and instead is solely motivated by external factors.

In support of prior research by Luebee et al. (2016) and Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012), students who perceive helicopter parenting were also found to have lower behavioral and emotional academic engagement. In accordance with self-determination theory individuals with

high levels of intrinsic motivation tend to have better academic outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1990).

The current study, along with prior research, suggests that helicopter parenting may have several maladaptive downstream effects, such as stifled development of self-determination components and in turn intrinsic motivation, which may suggest why students who perceive helicopter parenting have poorer academic engagement. An additional consideration is that students who perceive having helicopter parents may also miss out on more scholarly opportunities as they may need to ask their parents for permission before enrolling in certain classes or going on academic field trips.

Another variable analyzed which concerns college life was extracurricular involvement. For this analysis, no significant correlation between helicopter parenting and extracurricular involvement was found. Considering a large proportion of our sample were first-year students (54%), these students may not have had a lot of opportunities yet for college involvement. This lack of representation for college class could pose as a potential limitation to the study in that first years are less likely to be involved simply due to the limited amount of time they have had in college. In the future, it would be advised to have a sample of students equally representative of all years in college to accurately assess the relationship between perceived helicopter parenting and extracurricular involvement.

Another aspect to consider for the influence of helicopter parents is the increase in efficient technology for communication and the ability parents have to track their children's phones. Before the use of cellphones going away to college was considered a very independent, autonomous act, but now that parents can easily check in with their children multiple times a day via text and calls, it is much easier for parents to monitor and control their child's life. Though

some might argue that closer parent-child relationships are a good thing, the dependent nature that helicopter parenting is rooted in may lead to potential consequences.

### **Future Directions**

The current study explored an area of research, perceived helicopter parenting in college students. Certain aspects of the current study replicated past research, like the associations between helicopter parenting and constructs related to emerging adulthood and academic engagement, to contribute to the literature pertaining to helicopter parenting and parenting styles in general. While other variables concerned with self-determination theory have added novel information to the ever-growing and crucial research field of perceived helicopter parenting. Possible implications from this study could include professor and advisor intervention training to encourage the facilitation of developmental components like autonomy and competence in students. Another application from this research could be applied to orientation programs for new parents. In these orientation sessions, parents may benefit from being reminded to not only limit their involvement but also to encourage their student to be autonomous and solve issues on their own.

This study aimed to assess when students start to engage in adult behaviors. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs to capture when students begin to shift from adolescent to adult behavior. From the current study, these connections and scale appear strongly connected to college behavior. Further research should be conducted to replicate these findings and consider the use of a longitudinal design to see where perceptions shift for parents and students and if this pattern of behavior is established prior to entering college.

Through this research perceived helicopter parenting has been linked to variables of self-determination theory. Self-determination theory has been used in a wide variety of different

intervention applications such as education, health, work, and now, perceived helicopter parenting has been linked to this field of study as well. Researchers and other university officials may now be able to draw from this theoretical perspective to develop interventions that address the issues pertaining to self-determination variables and attempt to target when these developmental issues occur.

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*Tables and Figures*

**Table 1** Means and standard deviations for measured variables.

Measures	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Helicopter Parenting	1.91	.70
Behavioral Control	1.76	.81
Psychological Control	2.14	1.00
Emerging Adulthood Identity		
- Behavior (8-items)	5.2	1.9
- Role Transition (8-items)	1.1	2.0
- Cognitive (1-item)	.63	.48
- Emotion (4-items)	1.6	1.1
Self Determination need satisfaction		
- Autonomy	4.25	.70
- Competence	4.2	.73
- Social Belongingness	3.9	.90
Intrinsic Motivation for academics	3.7	1.1
Academic Engagement		
- Emotional	3.7	.90
- Cognitive	2.8	.76
- Behavioral	4.4	.84